

PACIFIC  FORUM

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL OF BILATERAL
RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

US-KOREA RELATIONS

FAILING TO FIND COMMON CAUSE

ROB YORK, PACIFIC FORUM
HARRY KAZIANIS, CENTER FOR THE NATIONAL INTEREST

The US impasse with both Koreas carried over into 2020, with little official contact with North Korea and negotiations with South Korea over troop burden-sharing going into overtime. The global pandemic forced all three governments to make sharp adjustments, with President Trump reaching out to both Seoul and Pyongyang to either offer or solicit assistance. But in both cases, the rifts appear too deep to forget, even in the face of a shared catastrophe like COVID-19.

This article is extracted from *Comparative Connections*: A Triannual E-Journal of Bilateral Relations in the Indo-Pacific, Vol. 22, No. 1, May 2020. Preferred citation: Rob York and Harry Kazianis, "US-Korea Relations: Failing to Find Common Cause," *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp 43-52.

The United States [ended 2019](#) at an impasse with both Koreas, which, at least for now has largely carried over into 2020. After failing to make any headway in discussions over the North Korea's nuclear program and international sanctions in 2019, Washington and Pyongyang spent the first four months of this year with little official contact. Meanwhile, Washington's tensions with Seoul over troop burden-sharing have gone into overtime and reached a state of *ad absurdum*, with US President Donald Trump belittling a South Korean film's Oscar win and South Korean protesters seeing manifestations of colonial prejudices in the US ambassador's mustache.

Of course, none of the three governments entered 2020 expecting a global pandemic, and all three have had to make sharp adjustments both domestically and diplomatically as a consequence. US President Donald Trump has personally reached out to both Seoul and Pyongyang as the international climate worsened in the hopes of seeing greater cooperation. In both cases, though, the rifts appear too deep to forget, even in the face of a global trial like the Covid-19 pandemic.

The US' dispute with North Korea is the more obvious of the two, having outlived the Cold War from which it sprang. Pyongyang's take on its own survival is [profoundly realist](#), pushing it to embrace nuclear weapons as zealously as the US has committed to preventing their proliferation. Washington and Seoul, on the other hand, are long-time allies, but the dispute over troop burden-sharing has thrown the sensitivities of their constituent populations in stark relief: Trump was propelled to the presidency, in part, by a sentiment among the American public that the US contributions on the global stage have gone unappreciated. South Korea, for its part, has become a full-fledged middle power, but memories of colonial exploitation and treatment of the Korean Peninsula as a mere global strategic chess piece animate this, as well [as past dustups](#) with the US. Such disputes are deep-seated and will not easily subside, especially as long as voters in both countries continue to endorse these positions. While the international health scare may be an opportunity for cooperation, it looks unlikely to solve more fundamental issues between the parties involved.

Global Crisis, Bilateral Maneuvers

The pandemic that brought economic activity to a screeching halt around the world similarly cast a shadow over diplomacy, US interactions with both Koreas being no exception. North Korea [shut its borders](#) completely and made defending against the Covid-19 a feature of [state media](#), while South Korea struggled through February and enacted sweeping measures, from closing schools to two-week quarantines on all new arrivals in the country. However, its commitment to comprehensive [testing and tracing](#) of those the infected, and those they have come into contact with, allowed life to proceed for most citizens without the lockdowns other countries have endured. The US, where stringent measures have been implemented on a state-by-state basis, attempted to use the pandemic as an opportunity for better relations with both Koreas – by either seeking or offering assistance.



Figure 1 A “drive-thru” Covid-19 screening center in Daegu.
Photo: Reuters

In the case of South Korea, the US first issued a restriction on travel to and from the country in late February—a Level 3 travel advisory [issued](#) from the State Department, which it followed on March 8 by [suspending travel](#) to and from the country by military personnel and their families. This remains in effect, though Trump has said he may reevaluate it if the situation improves. On March 24, as the US' battle with the pandemic deteriorated, Trump [took part](#) in a phone conversation with South Korean President Moon Jae-in requesting medical equipment.

North Korea, for its part, still claims to have been unaffected by the virus, though this has been greeted with [broad skepticism](#). US State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortugas, as

early as Feb. 13, [identified](#) the northern half of the peninsula as facing a unique danger from the virus. Then, on March 21, Kim Jong-un's younger sister Kim Yo-jong [issued](#) a statement saying Trump had sent a personal letter to her older brother expressing well wishes and offering assistance on Covid-19. Still, North Korea at present appears uninterested in such aid, as doing would be an admission of that their strategy of sealing borders has not been as successful as claimed.

Personally Warm, Officially Enemies

And for now, the differences of opinion between the two countries may be too entrenched for the virus to help bridge the gaps between them. Relations between North Korea and the US ended on a sour note in 2019, as the attempted rapprochement that began the previous year bore no fruit. Both sides blamed the other for refusing to concede more, and began hinting of a return to old hostility, with the “dotard” and “rocket man” epithets [briefly returning](#). However, tensions did not escalate significantly in the first four months of 2020, and the US president still speaks fondly of Kim and credits their personal warmth with preventing war on the peninsula. Regardless how the two leaders think of one another, though, tensions between their governments persisted, defined by missile tests and reports of illicit North Korea behavior.

As in the past, the year began with a statement from the North Korean leader. While in previous years messages sent around this [signaled an openness](#) to cooperation, Kim Jong-un words at the end of 2019 [called](#) US behavior “gangster-like,” taking them to task for demanding too much and threatening vague but severe consequences:

... forcing a demand against the fundamental interests of our state, the deadlock between the DPRK and the United States inevitably has to take on a protracted character. We will never allow the disgraceful United States to use the DPRK-US dialogue for dishonest purpose but go over to a shocking real action to make it completely pay for the sufferings our people have so far undergone and the deterred development.

The ominous tone continued, as the leader warned that North Korea would need to “more

actively develop strategic weapons.” But weapons of what sort? This remains to be seen—North Korea was hardly quiet during this period on the weapons front, but that does not mean its behavior [was unprecedented](#).

On March 2, South Korea's joint chiefs of staff said North Korea [fired](#) two short-range projectiles from Kangwon Province toward the East Sea, which it followed up by [firing](#) three more from Hamgyong Province toward the East Sea on March 9, and [firing](#) another two from Pyongan province presumed to be short-range ballistic missiles toward the East Sea. It has [been suggested](#) that North Korea chose to ramp up missile testing in March as much of the world had its eyes elsewhere, due to the pandemic, and it would be more difficult for the world to unite behind a statement of condemnation, much less new sanctions. But whether they would have resulted in a backlash from President Trump is hardly assured; the US president has paid little attention to [short-range missile tests](#) incapable of reaching the US mainland, and in early March [he said](#) that North Korea is not “on the minds of too many Americans,” though he insisted it ought to be.

But just because Trump himself devoted most of his attention elsewhere does not mean that his government did the same. On Feb. 14, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, along with the FBI, [released](#) six Malware Analysis Reports (MARs) and updated one MAR shedding light on malicious cyber activity from North Korea. Then, on April 15, three Cabinet-level US departments, again with the FBI, [released](#) a report detailing the North Korean cyber offensive campaign to launder money and extort companies to funnel resources for its nuclear weapons program.

Under the pressure of robust US and UN sanctions, the DPRK has increasingly relied on illicit activities—including cybercrime—to generate revenue for its weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile programs. ... The DPRK has the capability to conduct disruptive or destructive cyber activities affecting US critical infrastructure. The DPRK also uses cyber capabilities to steal from financial institutions, and has demonstrated a pattern of disruptive and harmful cyber activity that is wholly inconsistent with the growing international consensus on what

constitutes responsible State behavior in cyberspace.

Senior administration figures were not silent either: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [said](#) on March 15 that he called for renewed pressure and sanctions against North Korea at G7 teleconference, saying the world must “remain united in calling on North Korea to return to negotiations, and stay committed to applying diplomatic and economic pressure over its illegal nuclear and ballistic missile programs.” This did not go unnoticed by the North, as the director general of their foreign ministry rebuked Pompeo and, implicitly, Trump [six days later](#), for allowing this public criticism just days after the president’s letter offering Covid-19 assistance. “This makes us confused about who the real chief executive is in the United States,” the statement said.

And even though the regime has previously been willing to flatter Trump himself, calling the relationship he enjoys with Kim “[mysteriously wonderful](#),” this has its limits: on April 18 Trump [told](#) the press that he had received a letter from Kim, which he touted as evidence of their unprecedented relationship. However, on the following day the North Korean Foreign Ministry [denied](#) that any letter had been sent recently, and said that “relations between the top leaders of the DPRK and the US are not an issue to be taken up just for diversion nor should it be misused for meeting selfish purposes.”

A North Korea Without Kim?

Under Trump North Korea-US relations has largely centered around the interactions between the two leaders—from their early [fiery feuds](#) to their later [love letters](#)—but the last two weeks of April left observers wondering what would happen if there were no leader to send letters to Trump. Following Kim Jong-un’s absence from a pair of notable public holidays, mysterious reports of serious health problems and even death sprang up, and [state media reports](#) that referenced the young leader but did not display him were of little help. The events that followed raised numerous questions about US and South Korean intelligence, the reliability of media coverage of North Korea and its young leader, but also whether the regime could survive Kim’s absence and what contingency plans the US and South Korea have in place if it cannot. Such questions did not have to be answered for the time being, as Kim returned at

the beginning of May, but policymakers may treat this a reprieve rather than a relief.

Observers did not know it at the time, but the saga of Kim’s disappearance began on April 15, celebrated in North Korea as Day of the Sun, the birth anniversary of founding leader Kim Il-sung. It is the country’s most important national holiday, an opportunity for all North Koreans from the incumbent leader on down, to pay respects to “Eternal President,” and outside observers frequently watch the date for provocative acts. This time, however, the event was noteworthy for what was not on display: for the first time since he became leader, Kim Jong-un [did not attend](#) the ceremonies.

Though this raised eyebrows at the time, it was not until five days later that rumors went into overdrive when the Seoul-based online newspaper *The Daily NK*, which makes use of an extensive defector network to report on events inside North Korea, [reported](#) that Kim had undergone a cardiovascular procedure on April 12, and was receiving treatment in Hyangsan County of the country’s northwestern North Pyongan Province. When the story was picked up by CNN, with the words “[grave danger](#)” thrown about, suddenly Kim’s well-being became international news, with both US and South Korean government sources questioned over what they knew. On April 25, Kim then missed public celebration of [Military Foundation Day](#).

In the days to come the US side was all over the map, with intelligence sources [telling](#) CNN only that they were watching the situation closely, and Trump himself [saying](#) he did not know how his on-again, off-again negotiations partner was doing, only stating that he wished him well. An MSNBC anchor tweeted, [then deleted](#), a claim that two US officials had told her Kim was “brain dead.” South Korean sources, however, all the way up to the presidential residence [stated](#) that they could see no unusual signs regarding Kim. Moon Chung-in, South Korean special adviser to the president and one of the leading advocates for engagement with the North, [chimed in](#) on April 26, saying that Kim was “alive and well.” By April 24 Trump had changed his tune, declaring not only that Kim was in no danger but that those saying he was were “[fake news](#)” and based off “old documents.” On April 27 he added that he had a “[very good idea](#)” about how Kim was doing but that he could not discuss it further. On April 28, the South Korean Unification Minister further fueled the fire by

[suggesting](#) Kim's absence was due to concerns over the Covid-19, rather than cardiovascular issues.

We may never know the explanation for Kim's lost weeks out of sight, but hints about his state could be found in abundance. For one, [satellite imagery](#) showed his personal convoy in Wonsan, Kangwon Province in late April, and even while out of sight the leader's exploits were never far from the pages of state media, as the *Rodong Sinmun* [described him](#) sending "appreciation" to workers of the Wonsan-Kalma tourist zone, as well as sending messages to friendly governments.

Then, on May 1, Kim [suddenly re-emerged](#) in state media, which publicized his appearance at a ribbon cutting for the Sunchon Phosphatic Fertilizer Factory. His sister, Kim Yo-jong, around whom much speculation centered, appeared at his side, dutifully carrying his ribbon-cutting scissors. No explanation for his time out of the public eye, including at the major festivities of the Day of the Sun and Military Foundation Day, was given, but his return was vindication for South Korean government sources, as well as Trump himself, who [tweeted](#) that he was glad to see Kim "back, and well" despite the absence of talks between them in recent months.



Figure 2 Kim Jong-Un reemerges at the opening of a fertilizer factory after weeks of speculation. Photo: KCNA via Reuters

This was not Kim's first long absence from the spotlight—in September and October of 2014 he [reappeared in public](#) after being gone for a month and a half, a disappearance that prompted similar speculation. Unlike that event five and a half years ago, Kim this time was not supporting himself with cane upon his return, but that did not stop North Korea watchers from

[scrutinizing the pictures](#) for signs of medical maladies.

The young strongman's health has been a concern for many North Korea observers over the years – a heavy smoker who stands 5'7 and weighs in at 300 pounds, Kim's well-being has long been questionable, especially as the children he reportedly has with wife Ri Sol-ju would be too young to succeed him. If he were to die or suddenly become incapacitated, it would therefore be the first time in North Korea's eight-decade history in which the country has not had a generational succession plan in place.

Kim's younger sister Yo-jong is the only family member in the upper echelons of government at the moment, and analysts say it is far from clear that a woman would be accepted as leader in North Korea's highly patriarchal society. His uncle Kim Pyong-il, last surviving son of Kim Il-sung, has served the country as ambassador to several European countries. However, Kim Jong-un, like his father Kim Jong-il before him, has seen fit to keep Kim Pyong-il far from the levers of power by [stationing him](#) a continent away. Other [key figures](#) like Choe Ryong-hae, president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, would likely have the most practical experience when it comes to leading the country, but this could be a tough sell in a country heavily invested in the "revolutionary lineage" of the [Mount Paektu bloodline](#) and without the descent of the "Eternal President" Kim Il-sung at the country's helm. If there is no clear leader, the possibility of a power struggle and regime instability comes into play, with questions of how the US, along with South Korea, would respond and what arrangement with China—which has long seen North Korea as a useful buffer zone against US influence—could be reached. The timing of such a development could hardly be worse, considering [the depths](#) the US-China relationship has sunk to in recent months.

More practically, even as their governments have maintained hostility toward one another, Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump have been at pains to maintain their cordial relationship. In Kim's absence, relations between the two countries might further deteriorate. Again, Kim's return does seemingly make this a moot point, but perhaps not for good. One medical expert [recently calculated](#) that Kim's poor health habits put him at a 30-33% risk of a

“cardiovascular disease event,” a significantly risk for a man in his mid-to-late 30s, and certain to go higher with each year barring a significant lifestyle change. It therefore behooves US policymakers to prepare for the possibility, and to coordinate with its partners in the region—particularly South Korea.

Mustaches, Movies, and Morass

But that raises the question of how prepared Washington and Seoul are for coordination. South Korea-US relations in this period were defined primarily by their inability to come to terms over a troop burden-sharing arrangement. The Covid-19 was an opportunity to ease the tension, as South Korea’s response has been held out as an international model, and Seoul is well-positioned to export its experience in coping with the pandemic. However, relations were largely defined by the inability to break the stalemate in negotiations, and the disagreements sometimes turned petty.

The year did not get off to a promising start. On Jan. 16, US Ambassador to South Korea Harry Harris [warned](#) that time was short for the two sides to complete their Special Measures Agreement, after South Korea rejected the US request to increase its financial commitment to stationing US soldiers in Korea fivefold, to \$5 billion. Harris, a retired admiral, who was born in Japan to an American Navy officer and a Japanese mother, has frequently borne the brunt of Korean frustration with talks, with [some](#) claiming that his mustache is reminiscent of the governors-general who ruled the Korean Peninsula on Imperial Japan’s behalf before the end of World War II. Harris has taken the criticisms in stride, though, denying that he has bias against Korea but saying he will continue to represent the US government’s position in talks. He has also added that his mustache has nothing to do with his Japanese lineage, but is instead something he chose to do after he left military service in 2018.

President Trump, for his part, has frequently criticized not only the financial arrangement for stationing troops in Korea but also the free trade agreement his predecessor reached with Seoul. He likely did not help ease South Koreans’ sense that he bears a grudge against them when he ventured into film criticism in February. A week and a half after South Korea’s *Parasite* became the first non-English language film to win the Oscar for best picture, Trump told a venue full

of his supporters in Colorado Springs:

And the winner is a movie from South Korea! What the hell was that all about? We’ve got enough problems with South Korea with trade. On top of it they give them the best movie of the year? Was it good? I don’t know. ... Let’s get *Gone with the Wind*. Can we get *Gone with the Wind* back please?

While it is easy to fixate on the president’s words, it should also be noted that they drew both laughs and cheers from his audience in Colorado: a state Trump did not even win in 2016. While South Korean nationalism is strong—as is [their opposition](#) to a fivefold burden-sharing increase—it must be noted that Trump’s opinions on the US-South Korea alliance are not his alone. Indeed, ingrained public sentiment on both sides helps explain why the negotiations between the two sides show no sign of stopping. Signs of a [tentative agreement](#) have been announced—and been [announced again](#)—but nothing concrete produced as of early May.

Furthermore, the US cannot count on South Korean conservatives emerging as a counterweight to Moon administration and undermining its negotiating position either, as Moon’s Democratic Party achieved a historic triumph in the National Assembly elections of mid-April. South Korea’s ruling Democratic Party [won](#) 180 of 300 seats in National Assembly elections in a landslide victory, compared to the conservative United Future Party’s 103. It was the worst performance by the conservative bloc since South Korea’s democratic transition in 1987. The US relationship was not decisive in the campaign—conservatives criticized the Moon government’s early missteps in handling the outbreak, but this was never going to succeed while so much of the rest of the world is struggling more than Korea is—yet the sweeping victory gives the Democrats the authority to fast-track legislation and will likely be interpreted as a broad vote of confidence in their handling of affairs—including the alliance.



Figure 3 Former South Korean Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon of the ruling Democratic Party celebrates his constituency victory in the National Assembly elections. Photo: Kyodo

Conclusion: No Change Until November?

While experts in Washington and Seoul will continually make predictions about the course of America's relations with both Koreas, one upcoming event will likely dominate the scope and tenor of how all three nations view each other: the 2020 US presidential election in November.

For Washington, the Trump administration will likely continue to hold true to its policy of "maximum pressure" on the North and offer very few concessions, fearing that any sort of diplomatic failure or additional summit perceived in a negative light would hurt Trump's political fortunes, meaning maintaining the status quo is the most likely scenario. There is, however, hope that Washington could lower its demands on Seoul for a new cost sharing agreement—a topic the American public knows little about. Sadly, at present, there seems to be little to no sense of urgency on the Trump administration's part to conclude any agreement anytime soon. Here once again, weighing the political stakes, the status quo is the least politically risky option.

North Korea also has strong incentives to wait until November's results are clear. With Kim likely worried that any deal he could make with Washington now could be scrapped if a Biden administration were to take office, Kim will clearly be cautious and wait to get an understanding of who his negotiating partner will be. That also means Kim will surely limit his interactions with Seoul, knowing that they would need to be blessed in large part by Washington, who under present circumstances

and timing would be leery of allowing the Moon government to vary from the current diplomatic approach and take any risks that could damage Trump's reelection chances, even if the risks are small.

As for Seoul, with Moon's party winning the recent April election, his government would like to use some of its hard-won political capital to try and further inter-Korean relations. However, with the US and North Korea likely in a diplomatic holding pattern, the best the Moon government can hope for is a policy of trying to create the conditions for a possible breakthrough once the November election results are clear. However, even that would be difficult at best as the Trump administration may see a large turnover in national security staff in key positions, as happens from time to time at the end of a first term. Additionally, if a president-elect Biden were to become a reality, the Moon government may be forced to consider what could be a renewed policy of Obama-era style "strategic patience."

CHRONOLOGY OF US-KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY – MAY 2020

Dec. 31, 2019: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un Calls US behavior “gangster-like,” and states that North Korea will deploy a new strategic weapon.

Jan. 14, 2020: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-hwa [hold](#) trilateral meeting with Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu; Pompeo urged South Korean cooperation in the Middle East, and Kang urged quicker reconciliation efforts with DPRK.

Jan. 15, 2020: US President Donald Trump [says](#) China has been “very helpful” with respect to Kim Jong Un, and says the US will be working closely with China on North Korea in luncheon remarks following US-China Phase One Trade Agreement signing with Chinese Vice Premier Liu He.

Jan. 16, 2020: US Ambassador to South Korea Harry Harris [says](#) further work needs to be done on Special Measures Agreement, but gaps are closing.

Jan. 20, 2020: Harris [responds](#) to criticism over his facial appearance, US Department of State spokesperson Morgan Ortagus also defends Harris.

Feb. 13, 2020: US Department of State spokesperson Ortagus [issues](#) a press statement expressing concern over the vulnerability of North Korea to COVID-19, offering support and aid.

Feb. 14, 2020: US CISA and the FBI [release](#) six Malware Analysis Reports (MARs) and update one MAR shedding light on malicious cyber activity from North Korea.

Feb. 21, 2020: Trump [decree](#)s *Parasite*’s Oscar win, saying “We’ve got enough problems with South Korea on trade. On top of that, they give them best movie of the year?”

Feb. 29, 2020: US Department of State [issues](#) a Level 3 travel advisory to South Korea due to COVID-19.

March 2, 2020: South Korean JCS says North Korea [fired](#) two short-range projectiles from Kangwon Province toward the East Sea.

March 8, 2020: US Department of the Army [suspends](#) travel to and from South Korea by soldiers and their family due to COVID-19.

March 8, 2020: South Korean JCS says North Korea [fired](#) three projectiles from Hamgyong Province toward the East Sea.

March 12, 2020: Trump, in an address to the nation, [says](#) the US may reevaluate travel warning to South Korea if the COVID-19 situation improves.

March 20, 2020: North Korea fires two projectiles presumed to be short-range ballistic missiles toward the East Sea.

March 21, 2020: Kim Yo Jong [issues](#) a press statement saying Trump sent a personal letter to Kim Jong Un expressing well wishes and offering assistance on COVID-19.

March 21, 2020: South Korean JCS says North Korea [fired](#) two projectiles from Pyongan province presumed to be short-range ballistic missiles (ATACMS or Russia's Iskander) toward the East Sea.

March 24, 2020: Trump [holds](#) phone call with South Korean President Moon Jae-in requesting medical equipment.

March 25, 2020: Pompeo [says](#) he called for renewed pressure and sanctions against North Korea at G7 teleconference.

March 28, 2020: North Korea fires what appear to be two short-range ballistic missiles toward the East Sea.

March 31, 2020: DPRK Director General of the Foreign Ministry [criticizes](#) Pompeo’s call for renewed sanctions, despite Trump’s letter, and warns against further provocations against North Korea.

April 2, 2020: North Korea's director of central emergency anti-epidemic headquarters Pak Myong Su [says](#) there are no cases of COVID-19 in the country.

April 6, 2020: US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper [says](#) he discussed importance of an "equitable" defense cost-sharing agreement with South Korean counterpart Jeong Kyeong-doo, following reports that a tentative agreement was reached.

April 14, 2020: South Korean JCS says North Korea [fired](#) two short-range projectiles believed to be anti-cruise missiles from Wonsan province on eve of national founder Kim Il Sung's birthday and South Korean elections.

April 15, 2020: US departments of State, Treasury, and Homeland Security, along with the FBI [release](#) interagency report detailing North Korean cyber offensive campaign to launder money and extort companies to funnel resources for nuclear weapons program.

April 15, 2020: Kim Jong Un [is](#) notably absent from celebrations of country's founding father Kim Il Sung's birthday.

April 16, 2020: South Korea's ruling Democratic Party [wins](#) 180 of 300 seats in National Assembly elections in a landslide victory, to the United Future Party's 103.

April 18, 2020: Trump [says](#) he received personal letter from Kim Jong Un to press and during phone call with Moon.

April 19, 2020: North Korean Foreign Ministry [denies](#) that North Korean leader sent any recent personal letter to Trump.

April 20, 2020: North Korea-focused undercover media outlet *Daily NK* [reports](#) that Kim Jong Un's health is in jeopardy following cardiovascular procedure on April 12, and is receiving treatment in Hyangsan County.

April 20, 2020: South Korea's Blue House [says](#) there are no unusual signs concerning North Korean leader Kim's health.

April 21, 2020: Trump [says](#) he doesn't know about Kim's health and wishes him well.

April 21, 2020: CNN, citing officials, [says](#) US intelligence is closely monitoring reports on Kim's health.

April 24, 2020: Trump [says](#) reports concerning Kim's ailing health are "fake news," "incorrect," and are based off "old documents."

April 25, 2020: Satellite imagery analysis [emerges](#) depicting North Korean leader Kim's personal train at Wonsan on April 21 and 23. Kim does not celebrate Military Foundation Day publicly.

April 26, 2020: South Korean special adviser to the President Moon Chung-in [says](#) Kim Jong Un "is alive and well," adding that the ROK government position is "firm."

April 27, 2020: North Korean media outlet *Rodong Sinmun* [releases](#) report stating North Korean leader Kim "sent his appreciation" to workers of the Wonsan-Kalma tourist zone.

April 27, 2020: Trump [says](#) he has a "very good idea" about the condition of North Korean leader Kim, but "can't talk about it."

April 28, 2020: South Korean Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul [says](#) the ROK government is aware of Kim's location during parliamentary session, and that his absence could be because of "coronavirus concerns."

May 1, 2020: State media announces Kim's [public reappearance](#) at a ribbon cutting for the Suncheon Phosphatic Fertilizer Factory. Trump [tweets](#) the following day that he is glad to see Kim "back, and well!"

Chronology prepared by Pacific Forum Korea Foundation Fellow Kangkyu Lee

